

If This Were Noh

On a flight of steps at the bottom of the Tachibana trail,
we meet a pint-size crone in hiking gear,
who has vowed to climb the mountain two thousand days in a row.
By convention alone if this were Noh, she would be a *bosatsu*
or a demon in disguise—perhaps, both at the same time.

Coming to a fork, we follow her down the less travelled path
to see—she says—the ‘father’ and ‘mother’ of the forest trees,
two dragon-like *kusunokiis*, thirty meters high, over three meters wide,
and with huge talons gripping the mountainside
far longer than any living-thing nearby.

Along the way, she discretely gathers fallen *tsubaki*,
severed from the branch by loyal Spring’s invisible blade.
Piercing the backs of their crimson heads
with two twigs, she makes a pair of trophy-wands
to bless our path and lead us on.

But first we must place our palms on the unusually
straight trunk of a ‘power tree’ that sheds its bark in red-orangish
strips and is called *bakuchinoki* after the feverish gambler
who peels away all he’s got (and not got)
to stay in the game for one last hand or throw.

If this were Noh, we would’ve heard by now what past love,
what attachment and haunting compels her to climb
up and down the mountain steps for the rest of her days.
We would be told, too, what she sees *that we can’t see* as we stand
on the spot where a castle’s keep overlooked the bay.

One slow turn around the top, and she exits into the woods
as seamlessly as she appeared, leaving us alone
to find the way back down and guess what we would have known
from start if this were Noh—is it she, the mountain itself,
or one of the trees that titles the play?

Keeping the Mourning

The chill air slaps itself onto my face—
I wear it like a thin metallic mask.

Off-shore, the breeze crinkles the bay
in sheets of shook foil, its shimmer

keeping pace with my pace as I cross
the bridge and circle round again.

Yet already behind my back all that
tin-dazzle goes grey—the wind, slack.

*

The land lies flat, compacted where
there once were waves. Condos
rise in stacks up to forty stories high.

Free on your balcony to trap the sun,
particulate matter 100 x's thinner
than a single hair lodges in your lungs—

more insidious than ships or yellow
sand blown across the Sea of Japan.

*

Kashii's strand is famous for a double suicide
solved by a detective in a book.
He connects points and lines:

the lovers were faked,
but our local station, trains and time-tables are all
for real—the crabs, too,
scuttling in the rocks next to the bodies,
neatly staged in tabby socks
and polished shoes.

Of course the new park along the shore
plus Toys R Us across the street
make for a less desolate beach.

*

Day and night, planes cut a tangent
right to left across the sky,

one after another but only one at a time,
dropping out of sight
below the blinking red light
on the highest tower.

The horizon resets
and I am left like Chuai at his koto
looking out to sea:

“Nothing but water to be seen—
no promised land lies on the other side.”

For that half-truth, he had to die.

*

Summer sea-jellies bloom in the bay
where the empress washed her hair
and tied it like a man.

At what price has conquest come?
The amethyst flotilla
is “a fluctuating charm”

with its many moving arms—
lovely in the sun
but agony for the stung.

*

The mall lot fills up with cars
all backed into their parallel
slots, their snouts faced out,
doors clicked-on lock/unlock.

Families glide in and out of
shops inside a whale-size
palace, windowless but lit for
a dazzling, undersea queen—

everywhere present, nowhere
seen. We forget what it takes
to sail to *Ne-no-kuni* and back.
In the past, it was enough to

designate a mourner to go on
board in funeral dress and
sit alone—bereft—unwashed
and uncombed, repugnant to

behold. How cruel is it—afraid
of our own shadow, we offer
up the ugliest to deflect our
fate, and worse yet make him

forego the pleasure of eating
meat, lying with a woman,
even ridding himself of fleas.
Sooner or later we'll pay for

our sojourn—imagine every
last consumer becoming a keeper
of mourning! as if abstention
itself will return us to a natural

state or ever restore the links
ravaged from shore to shore.
When Chuai pushed away his
koto and refused to play on

for “a lying god,” his shaman
wife channeled a curse that
could double as our curse too:
Go straight in one direction.